

Official Transcript: Ellis Odjurhe (Full Interview)



Role:	Prison Operations Officer
Country of Origin:	Nigeria
Interview Date:	16 October 2008
Location:	Arusha, Tanzania
Interviewer:	Lisa P. Nathan
Videographer:	Max Andrews
Interpreter:	None

Interview Summary

Ellis Odjurhe speaks about his responsibilities as a Prison Operations Officer where he oversees the daily operations of the Tribunal's detention facilities. He stresses the need for improved security measures to adequately protect detainees and prison staff. He also emphasizes the need for rules to apply equally to judges, lawyers, investigators and others. Odjurhe further calls attention to the Tribunal's humanitarian and high quality detention services that stand in contrast with the poverty and harassment many detainees face after release.

The transcript of the interview begins on the following page.

Part 1

00:00 Lisa P. Nathan: Thank you for your time, greatly appreciate it, we know that you are very busy. So I will ask you questions and some of them I may ask "why" just so I understand better or if I don't understand a technical term because this is not my area.

00:15 Okay.

00:16 LPN: So to begin with could you tell me your name and what country you are from?

00:20 Okay, my name is Ellis Odjurhe. I'm a Nigerian.

00:28 LPN: And what is your role here?

00:31 At the detention, this, at the detention facility here I'm here as the OIC Operations, which means that I take care of the daily operations of the, of the detention facility.

00:48 LPN: So can you tell me about your background before you came here?

00:50 Okay. Before I came here I was in the Nigerian police force for 21 years, and during the course of that I had the privilege of serving with the UN as a Training Officer in Cambodia. That was in 1992 to '93. I was responsible for training of the police in a (___)-, a particular province known as Kampong Cham. At the end of the mission I, I went back to Nigeria and when I returned to Nigeria I continued with my duties as a police officer. In fact I was of the rank of an Assistant Superintendent.

01:39 After about a year I decided to go on a voluntary retirement from the police force. And immediately I left the police, I mean about three years after I left the police force I just thought of coming to join the UN again, having had a taste of it, before I, I thought of coming to join the UN again to give me an opportunity to, you know, mix with people from various part of the world. So that's how I found myself here.

02:19 And when I got here in 1998, at first I was at the headquarters there; that's the ICTR Headquarters. After about a year, I was, I was moved here and I was here as a team leader for a number of years, about seven years.

02:48 Then during that period I was acting occasion-, occasionally as OIC Operation whenever the incumbent was on leave. And eventually some time last year I was asked, I mean I was asked to come and assume the position of the OIC Operations which I have been holding up to this moment.

03:14 LPN: Thank you.

03:15 Welcome.

03:15 LPN: Can you tell me where you were in the spring of 1994? Do you remember?

- 03:23 Dur- 1994? Oh, 1994 I was in Nigeria. Yeah, I was in Nigeria and I was still in the police force. In fact that was the year I left the police. The (_____).
- 03:36 LPN: Do, do you remember hearing about the events in Rwanda?**
- 03:41 Yes, yes I did.
- 03:43 LPN: Can you, can you tell me more about what you remember, what you heard, where you were?**
- 03:49 Well, what we heard that time was that there was mass killing of one particular tribe by the other in Rwanda and we had some videos that were being sold in the shop. We bought them, we watched them and we saw how horrifying it was.
- 04:14 And (____), at the time I was applying for a job I never really specifically requested to come to this particular place, that is to come and serve and, in the tribunal responsible for the trial of the, the Rwandese. I merely applied to become a security officer with the UN but I was assigned to be here. It was not those incidence that really impelled me to come here.
- 04:45 LPN: When you found out that this would be where you were stationed, what did you know about this facility, this, the ICTR?**
- 04:53 When I felt?
- 04:54 LPN: Wha-, wha-, what did you know about, when you first heard that you were going to be stationed here . . .**
- 04:59 Uh-huh.
- 05:00 LPN: What did you know about the ICTR? Did you know – had you heard anything, did you, do you remember?**
- 05:07 Yes, I heard, the first time I heard of it was when the president of America, Bill Clinton that time, was proposing – and it was in a television program, I can't remember the program very well, when he was talking of an intention to set up a tribunal for the trial of people responsible for the Rwandan genocide. That was the first time I heard about it.
- 05:32 And then when at the time I applied to be a security officer and I, I got the offer that I had to come to this tribunal I was somehow happy that I was going to be part of a system that was going to be known for fighting injustice, impunity and so forth.

Part 2

- 00:00 LPN: So can you tell me about your role here; like what kind of responsibilities you have?**

00:07 Yeah, I am here as Operations Officer. My main duty is to ensure orderliness within the facility and ensure the safety of all the detainees, staff and so on. So to this end, I normally organize officers in various schedules to provide security coverage for their movement from here to the court.

00:43 And by the time they finish from the court, they are escorted safely back here. If there is need for them to be evacuated for medical checkup, I make sure I make adequate arrangements to see that there is sec-, security coverage for the movement. So basically that is it.

01:07 LPN: I'm sure it keeps you quite busy.

01:09 Mm.

01:10 LPN: So can you tell me, since you've been here, has there been s-, anything – you heard me ask this question earlier – that has surprised you about the way things work here at the ICTR or at the detention center? Or an event that surprised you?

01:25 Yes, what surprises me most here is that it appears – like the Commanding Officer rightly mentioned the other time – it appears that much regard is not being given for security measures. When you try to apply them there is a lot of opposition.

01:52 When the lawyers – as he said, when the lawyers come here, most of, not all of them, there are some of them who are quite cooperative, but some of them when they come they give a lot of trouble to the officers at the gate.

02:09 For example there is no way you can say that you have searched someone when actually that person is still in possession of something that is unauthorized. Somebody – when you say you've searched someone it is assumed that that person is free of anything that can constitute nuisance or any form of danger to the facility.

02:32 But here we, we, we have a situation where a lawyer will come and maybe the officer at the gate ask him, "Let me open this book and see what is there." They say, "Ah, no, you want to see my legal ma-, materials. You want to see my defense." Okay, if I don't open it and you keep some currency notes here, there is no way the machine can detect that you have currency notes there. Now you go in, you pass the, the, maybe about a 1,000 or 2,000 dollars to a detainee.

03:05 With which if other security measures are not properly taken care of, he could, he could, I mean that could aid him in facilitating his escape if he wishes to. So I think there is not much support or much regard for the need to really ensure that security regulations are completely obeyed.

03:36 Because it's really important, it's not just for any other thing it's for both the, the, the protection of the detainees themselves and the staff. So I th-, I wish there was more cooperation with the security system here. So.

03:57 LPN: So if you were involved in another international detention center, and it, for . . .

04:03 Yeah.

04:04 LPN: . . . would there be anything else that, you mentioned security and more, more security basically and more respect for the security.

04:13 Yes.

04:14 LPN: Are there something else on your mind or a couple of other things that you can think of that you would recommend be implemented in the future?

04:22 Yes, I think not something other than what I've just said but I think basically the, the idea will be the need to make the administration really understand the need for security rules to be equally applied to everybody.

04:45 Not a section of people, not that this is a, a, a lawyer, he should be treated differ-, different-, differently, this is an investigator, he should be treated differently, no. I think that is what I would want the administration to really support the security with.

Part 3

00:00 LPN: Don asked if I would ask you if you've ever had any escape attempts, or that you know of any, maybe that happened before you came.

00:10 So far there has been none but it cannot be said that it cannot happen. Possibly it has not happened because of the security measures in place.

00:27 LPN: Yes, I understand.

00:29 And besides that, I think another thing that has made it, that has made all the detainees or – yes all the detainees – not to be that inclined to escape may be the condition of detention. Because I think the condition of detention here is really very good.

00:52 It's very good in the sense that we have seen from experience occasions when people are discharged after they are, they finish their, their, their time here, they, they, they are reluctant to go. Yes, they prefer this place. They said the outside is – they don't consider outside that safe. We've had situations like that.

01:14 LPN: Can you say more, what do you mean by not safe?

01:18 They, they, they – I don't, I don't really, I cannot say specifically what they, they, they are afraid of, but they allege that, that the present, rather their, their, their antagonists or rather the, the other tribe in the, in Rwanda there will be hunting them and so forth. Those are their claims about it. I don't know how correct that is.

01:46 So I think they say that – and apart from that, there was a situation where somebody actually after completing his sentence here, when he was to be discharged – an old man – he was crying for days. He was saying that okay now he, he, he is not having the

freedom to go back to America- I think he was in, in, in the U.S. before he was arrest-, I mean, his arrest.

02:11 And at the time when he finished his term and he was to be rel-, released, the old man was crying because it was, this is a place where if at night a detainee is in trouble, he, he, he calls out, the duty officer goes there to attend to him. If he needs medical attention, the med-, the medical officer will be brought immediately, that -- no matter what.

02:36 Under any conditions the, the, the medical officer wi-, will be brought. But he, I think what was disturbing his mind was the idea that, "By the time I go out, would I have all this help?" Because now he was not free to go back to U.S. to mi-, to mix with his f-, family. And I think the U.S. government, they refused him entry because he was – they, they said he's a convict. As a convict they cannot admit him back to U.S.

03:04 So a-, after his discharge here, he had to get an accommodation around in town here. The (___), the, the, the children arranged accommodation for him to stay there in town and I think later the wife came. And really not much later after that, the man died. So I think he foresaw the hardship as compared with the situation here, because here they are really, really comfortable.

Part 4

00:00 **LPN: So I have a question for you that is, it is not a question I'm asking you in your – to answer as a UN – in your UN role but just as a person.**

00:11 Yeah.

00:12 **LPN: How do you feel about the, the UN does not – in the ICTR there's no capital punishment. What do you think of that?**

00:20 I think it's a good idea to me in person. I think it's a good idea because I think it is not for man to really – that's based on my personal philosophy . . .

00:30 **LPN: Mm-hmm.**

00:31 . . . it's not for man to really condemn a fellow man com-, entirely for any act because you don't know what led to it. I think God knows better. So capital punishment should be left in the hands of, of the creator not for, for, for man to, to mete out. So I think it is a good idea. And it has really helped the situation here.

00:57 I do say it many times that here we are lucky that we are running a facility where people are – the pe-, the, the, the kind of people who are sent here are not people who are sentenced to death or something more horrendous. Otherwise there would have been situations where the in-, the, the, the detainees or the inmates would have been very desperate to . . .

- 01:32 They would try everything to beat our security measures. So that has helped us a lot because with this problem we are having with this question of differentiating between who to search thoroughly and who not to search thoroughly, it could be a real source of danger to the facility. A lot of things can come in and which can aid the prisoner in escape.
- 01:57 So when they consider the fact that, "After all I'm, I'm not, I'm not sentenced to death, maybe f-, after some time I will still get out of the jail (____) and the condition here is not bad," so there, there, there is no cause for them to be that desperate to break out of jail. So I think it has really helped us.
- 02:17 LPN: Thank you. For my last question I would like to know what you think about justice, 'cause here in this facility now you have some people who are accused, but you also have people who have been found guilty of genocide and for crimes against humanity and here they are in your facility. And I'm, I wonder what your thoughts on justice are.**
- 02:39 Okay, can you explain that properly again? We have people who are?
- 02:43 LPN: Well you have people here who have been tried and convicted . . .**
- 02:48 Yeah.
- 02:49 LPN: . . . of some very horrific crimes. So I'm sure you've thought about those crimes . . .**
- 02:56 Yes, yes. Yes.
- 02:57 LPN: . . . what these people have done. And here they are in this international justice system.**
- 03:02 Mm-hmm.
- 03:03 LPN: What do you think about that?**
- 03:05 Well I think that the international justice system is a good thing to encourage, because it will really help this idea of impunity. This idea of people being in power and feeling that they can do whatever they like. It will really discourage it. And if it can, if the United Nations can really carry this to a far extent to reach everywhere, I think there would be more sanity in the world, yes.
- 03:37 LPN: I hope you're right. I, I did tell a mistruth, I have one more. If you could speak to the Rwandan people, what would you want to tell them?**
- 03:47 I-, in what respect?
- 03:49 LPN: As you're – in your role here at the detention center. There have been I'm, I know – I am sure you have read . . .**

03:56 Okay.

03:57 LPN: . . . the critiques of Rwandans, so what would you want them to know?

04:00 Well, I think the average Rwandan's intention or hope is that those found guilty should be condemned completely. That's – I don't know if I'm quite right but I think from some media report we used to hear from time to time, they criticize everything. Every liberal step we take here, they criticize it. It's to tell them that, that punishment or whatever should be left in the hands of the judicial system to decide.

04:41 Whatever the judicial system decide should be accepted. The idea of expecting the extreme to happen is not a very good idea. That should be left in the hands of God and they should learn to forgive and forget.

05:00 LPN: Thank you. Thank you very much for your time, sir.

05:05 Thank you.